

Darfur, the nightmare continues

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How can a citizen of a free country not pay attention? How can anyone, anywhere, not feel outraged? How can a person, whether religious or secular, not be moved by compassion? And above all, how can anyone who remembers remain silent?

Elie Wiesel said those words about Darfur in July 2004. Since then, the government of Sudan and its allied militia have continued their ethnically based attacks on the civilians of Darfur. And while the United States Congress and the Bush administration have declared that genocide is unfolding in Darfur, and a UN commission has documented widespread and systematic atrocities, precious little has actually been done.

The ongoing atrocities include the killing of civilians, torture, destruction of villages, rape and other forms of sexual violence, pillaging and forced displacement. Estimates of the death toll in Darfur now approach 300,000 or more. Ten thousand people a month are dying in Darfur. More than 1.8 million persons have been forced from their homes, and, unless the attacks subside and access by humanitarian organizations improves, as many as three million Sudanese people could be displaced before the end of the year.

This crisis is the result of deliberate, genocidal policies. Government forces have participated in the attacks on civilians.

The Janjaweed militias that have terrorized the people of Darfur have the support, direct and indirect, of the government of Sudan. Helicopter gunships continue to strafe villages, using nail-like flachettes unsuitable for anything other than killing. And, as a report by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Darfur concluded in February, "the magnitude and large-scale nature of some crimes against humanity, as well as their consistency over a long period of time, necessarily imply that these crimes result from a central planning operation."

THESE ATROCITIES can be stopped, but only through strong international pressure and complete access by humanitarian organizations, UN monitors and peacekeepers. When the UN briefly threatened sanctions last summer, humanitarian organizations arrived and lives were saved. Where African Union forces have been deployed, they have deterred attacks. But pressure has waned, and the UN Security Council has failed to apply sanctions. African Union forces have been slow to deploy and cannot cover the whole of Darfur.

Meanwhile, the government of Sudan and the Janjaweed have actively impeded the international community's ability to prevent, or even witness the atrocities. In recent months, militias have threatened to target foreigners and UN convoys, and the United Nations was forced to withdraw all of its international staff in West Darfur to the provincial capital.

It would not take much to save tens, if not hundreds of thousands of lives. Last week, the US Senate passed legislation, the Darfur Accountability Act, introduced by myself and Senator Sam Brownback, a Republican from Kansas. The legislation, which now must be accepted by the House of Representatives, establishes sanctions against those responsible for genocide and crimes against humanity in Darfur. It also calls for a UN Security Council resolution imposing sanctions against the government of Sudan, an effective arms embargo against the government, a military no-fly zone over Darfur, and an expanded African Union peacekeeping force with the mandate to protect civilians. Thus far, none of these steps has been taken.

Worse still, there appears to be little interest in Darfur as a diplomatic priority on the part of world leaders. During President George W. Bush's recent trip to Europe in which he met the leaders of Britain, France, Russia and NATO, the genocide raging in Africa was not once mentioned publicly. I welcome the discussion of Darfur at last week's NATO Ministerial, but ending the genocide will require consistent, forceful diplomacy, followed by real action.

The horrors taking place, the culpability of a sitting government, and the capacity of the international community to intervene have created a stark moral choice for Americans.

Not surprisingly, the Jewish community has been especially vocal. One by one, synagogues and Jewish groups too numerous to mention have come forward, not only with humanitarian contributions but with calls for action. This incredible outpouring of concern has also been encapsulated by the activities of the United States Memorial Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, which has declared a Genocide Emergency for Darfur.

In March, I had the honor to visit the new museum at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. As I walked through this remarkable and deeply stirring exhibit, I was reminded of the imperative to never again permit mankind to visit such evils on each other. I was also forced to confront direct and specific questions about why the West didn't act to save lives during the Holocaust, by accepting more refugees, allowing more Jews to go to Israel, or bombing the railway lines to the death camps.

Even as we should be asking these questions about our historical failures, we have the opportunity to apply the lessons of history. Our moral failures need not be repeated. As Elie Wiesel said last month, during the UN commemoration of the liberation of the death camps, victory in World War II came too late to save the victims of the Holocaust. "But," he added, "it is not too late for today's children, ours and yours."

The writer, a US senator, is a Democrat from New Jersey. He and Senator Sam Brownback were the authors of the resolution, passed by the Senate in July 2004, declaring the atrocities in Darfur to be genocide.



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